

Roy Arden interview by Alex Morrison

Alex Morrison: Your latest exhibition, *UNDERTHESUN*, held at the Contemporary Art Gallery here in Vancouver, was quite a departure from any work you had shown before. It featured found objects, oil paintings, graphite drawings, kinetic sculpture, *bricolage*, and collage. One might conclude that your work has now come to physically embody the liminal and discarded aspects of vernacular material culture that you documented photographically in the past. Can you comment on this transition from the immaterial to the material?

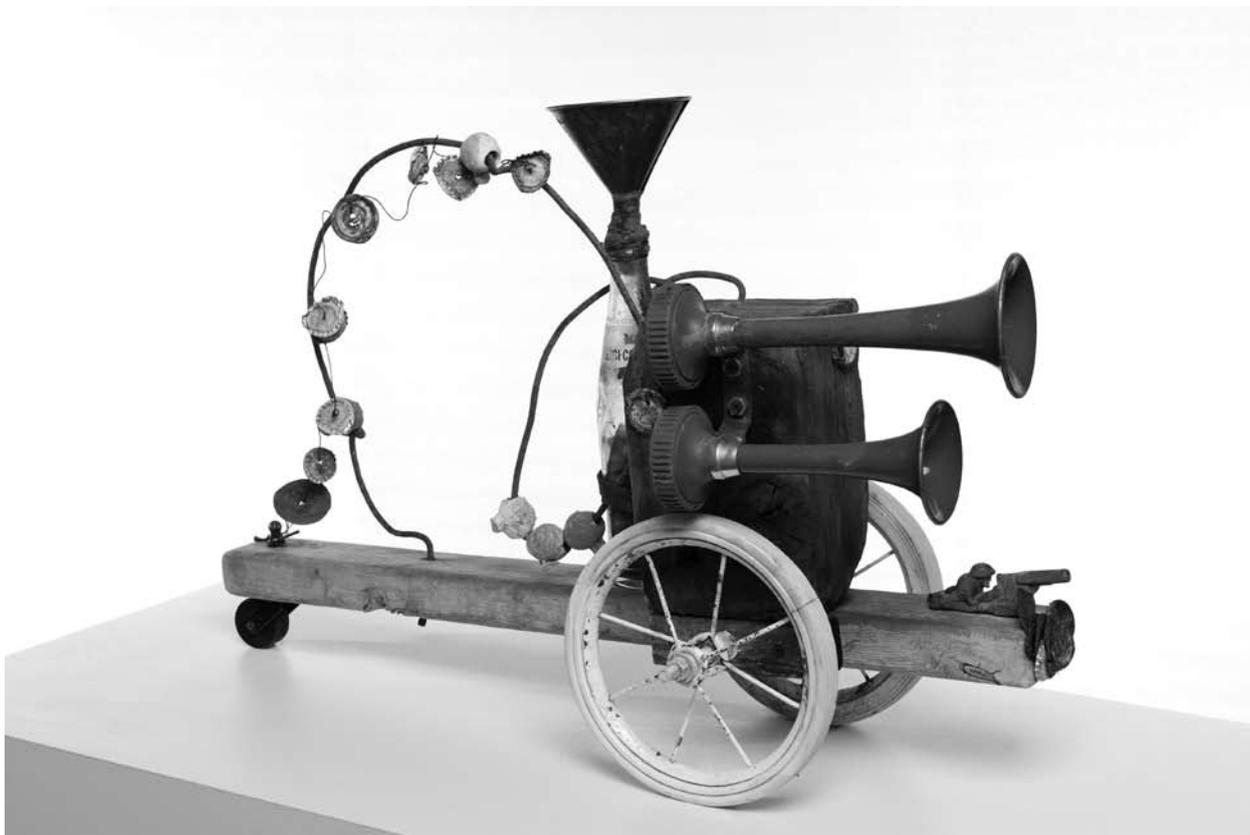
Roy Arden: It seems you are saying that photography is immaterial. I think it is just as material as painting or sculpture. However, I do acknowledge that there has always been a kind of neurosis about the body of the photograph, at least when the photo is used as art. The image in a photo is an almost micro-thin layer that you can't alter. You can slather paint on top, but that has rarely accomplished much. Even a digitally manipulated image is fixed - once it is printed you can't change it anymore. I think a lot of artists find the photo unsatisfying because its body is so phantom. You can see it in all the millions of attempts to improve on the photo by cutting, folding, painting, etc., and all the different ways they are mounted, framed, or displayed. Most of these experiments just end up being goofy, and it is the straight use of photography that generally holds up better. Painting, collage, and sculpture are so sensuous and satisfying because they have a fulsome and certain body. I am sure that had at least some part in my move to these mediums over the past few years. I started as a young person doing pretty much what I am doing now; I collected imagery and made collage, drawing, and painting based on that material. I also made sculpture from found objects. I always thought I would return to those mediums, but I guess it took longer than I thought it would. I had some serious things to do with photography, but at a certain point I just wasn't happy and finally realized it was because I had to explore these other things. The transition is from what I was seeing in my daily life, which I photographed, to things I have collected that are best interpreted through other mediums. For

example, I have collected many illustrations, and the best way to interpret them is through drawing or painting. I can control exactly what it is that I want to bring forward or emphasize and celebrate aspects like colour and texture. It's about finding the right medium for the job.

I recognize myself as a kind of rag and bone man or *bricoleur*. I sort through the trash heap of history looking for images that affect me, and then later I sort and analyze them and transform them into new works. It is just the way I work and it always came naturally. I have the archivist's mania, but I also have a poetic mind and purpose that recognizes the folly in collecting and ordering. In a way everything is *bricolage*. There isn't any real distinction between store bought paints and canvas, and things found in alleys - they are all just materials that can be used for art or something else. I used to get depressed in art supply stores because you can feel like you are just a serf in an art materials industry. I find repurposing used materials and images richer and more inspiring, but of course prescribed materials are still good for certain things.

AM: When you mention the celebration of colour and texture, I am reminded of your series of photographs entitled *Fragments, Photographs From 1981 - 1985*. Your presence seems to haunt these works even though you aren't featured in them (except in disguise), and I find that your presence has returned in the same fashion in the production of these new works. Can you talk about *Fragments* in relation to your newer works? Were you chiefly interested in what looks like a private pursuit of capturing the wan and forlorn beauty surrounding you? At the same time, were there any sorts of polemics informing and directing you? Was that to come later?

RA: *Fragments* was my first mature work and my first photographic work. At the time I was fully aware of the current trends in art, which were conceptualism and then The Pictures Generation work of people like Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine. However, with *Fragments* I was working from earlier models like Wols and Rauschenberg's early photography. I wanted to make very



Roy Arden
Curriculum Vitae 2011
 mixed media assemblage
 collection Byron Aceman, Vancouver
 photo: Scott Massey, CAG

personal photographs that weren't ironic. I don't know how "wan and forlorn" their beauty is, I was really just trying to make images of the world as I saw it, which I guess looks wan compared to advertisements. There is a *neue sachlichkeit* flavour to some of those images, a forensic vision that notes the bruises that commercial image culture would have airbrushed away. When I was making the photos in *Fragments*, I knew it was a project that was anachronistic in terms of art world teleology, but then I don't like to read the current bestsellers. I usually wait until years later before deciding if they are worth the attention. Art doesn't date. If it is good art it is always fresh. My work after *Fragments* with the archive photos and monochromes was more in step with current developments and was a kind of response to the Pictures tendency. It was synchronized with the current discourse so it was more accepted. With the direct photography I did after that, the landscapes and studies of the local, I again stepped out of time with the current discourse in favour of the oldest model of photography exemplified by Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. Although, this time the point was to change or redirect the discourse. I had recognized that straight photography could never get old and that it had a lot to offer at that moment – especially in Vancouver. Your question was about my presence in the work, and I have to believe it is there in all the work. I think you can hang works from any of those periods together successfully. The new work is maybe more fun than say the straight photography, and I think straight photography is like a kind of huge collective anthropological project that each photographer adds to in terms of content along with their own personal inflection, but it has some strict ground rules. My new direction is very much a pursuit of freedom in every sense possible. I am obsessed with freedom these days, and it feels good.

AM: Freedom is a great feeling, hard to pin down, but worth pursuing above most things. I'm curious about your stated desire to "change or re-direct the discourse." Can you sum up what you feel the discourse was at that time, and in what forms and attitudes

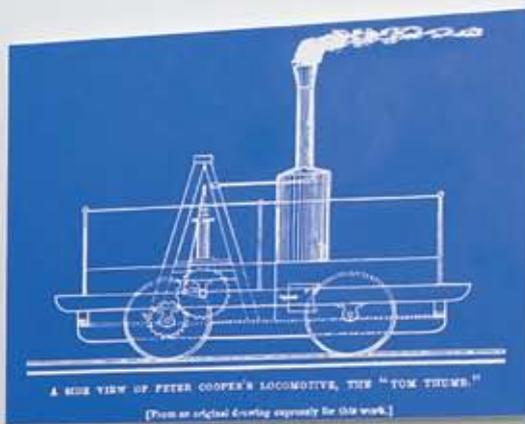
you think it might linger in now? Was the formal eclecticism of your recent exhibition a reaction to this lingering discourse, or perhaps a re-directing of it? I'd also like to talk about this notion of eclecticism. Eclecticism in art, and in some ways historicism as well, follows the concept that no single set of assumptions or styles can be employed to investigate or illustrate a subject. Is this the freedom that you are speaking of?

RA: I just thought that there was something like realist photography that needed to be articulated and had a lot to offer. Art must always be prescriptive to some extent. It just has to be. By articulating realism through my photo work I, therefore, had to be promoting it as a thing that might be worthwhile for others to do as well. As far as the new work goes, we are at a point where it seems everything is possible or permissible in art, and I suppose the CAG show allowed me to explore this for myself. I am not in favour of historicism if it means revivalism. I think art is always looking backwards to see if there is something that can be made new again - but one has to make it new. The freedom I am after is much more than the freedom to borrow from the past; I am looking for freedom in every aspect of my life and art. I have spent too many years in the past feeling trapped by my own constructions, and as I get older I want to avoid that. The art world rewards sameness, both the state sponsored art institution and the private market, but that is deadly for the artist. I often say that modernity is my main subject, but it is emerging that the true subject might be freedom, as that is probably the force behind modernity.

AM: Let's speak specifically now about some of the imagery found in *UNDERTHE SUN*. Firstly, the title of the exhibition conjures up the idiom "everything under the sun," meaning everything that exists or that one could possibly imagine. The look and feel of the exhibition definitely reflects this idea. Above all, there is a bit of a Victorian exhibition feel to the show, and to me it carried the atmosphere of an exhibition or fair in that traditional sense. This



Roy Arden
installation view of UNDERTHESUN exhibition, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2011
sculpture in foreground: *Sun Machine* 2011
photo: Scott Massey, CAG



was especially apparent in the room containing the *Sun Machine*, a sort of Ferris wheel that towered above the show. This reminded me of Victorian spectacles like the *Empire of India Exhibition*, held in London in 1895. This particular exhibition featured *The Great Wheel*, which in its time was the tallest Ferris wheel in the world. The *Sun Machine* really did foreground the idea of spectacle amongst this grouping of works. Would you like to elaborate on any special role this work played in the exhibition? What were some of your intentions in having the viewer operate the work?

RA: Yes, I was playing with spectacle; with the installation as the meeting point of the opposite forces of the market and government art support. Somehow, the installation has emerged as the definitive form of contemporary art. The market pulls art towards entertainment and Disney-ification as with artists like Jeff Koons and Paul McCarthy. At the same time, public money pulls art towards propaganda and pseudo-social science as with many Canadian artists and people like Thomas Hirschorn. Yet, both of these tendencies have merged through the installation and often overlap. It suits the museums and galleries because there is not much to do and the 'wow factor' seems to please everyone. Artists are now the exhibition designers and curators of their own shows. Many artists have recognized this, and like McCarthy, they use it to subversive or transgressive ends. I thought *UNDERTHESUN* was a bit like a Trojan horse in that the first impression is of colourful variety and simple, often cartoon images, movement, and sound etc. Kids really liked it. But after the initial surprise and a trial pedal on the *Sun Machine* (2011) or a honk of the horn on *Triumphal* (2011), one starts to really read the images and realize that they open up some serious issues.

Sun Machine was inspired by YouTube videos I'd seen of human powered Ferris wheels in India. They use human labour rather than gas or electricity because it is cheaper. Up to six or so young men constantly climb the wheel's support and then clasp the wheel while jumping down, thus, keeping it constantly turning. It looks unbelievably dangerous, and obviously I couldn't do anything like this in the developed world. I had been reading about a Dutch social initiative in the '70s involving free public bicycles all painted white and I thought that bicycle power would work better for my purposes. *Sun Machine* is a model for cooperation; people take turns at labouring on the bike to create a spectacle for their fellow humans. I positioned the bike facing away from the wheel so that the person pedaling doesn't see the spectacle while they are labouring. The rag-picker has been a figure in my work since the beginning, usually lurking in the periphery, but with *Sun Machine* I was curious to see what kind of spectacle I could create, almost alchemically, with just some colourful pieces of cloth. It is very beautiful when the wheel spins fast because the rags lose their objecthood and blur into a disc of pure colour. The title, *Sun Machine*, is also a reference to the song "Memory of a Free Festival" by David Bowie. It's from his hippie period and describes the psychedelic tinged disillusionment of a festivalgoer who realizes the "revolution" is doomed. There is an elegiac tone, and I think *Sun Machine* is a kind of bittersweet thing because

its promise is something few believe in anymore - or at least they realize it won't come fast or easy. After the surprise and interactive play, the viewer starts to look at the paintings and collages etc.

AM: All of the paintings and drawings depict found images you have culled from the internet as well as material sources. Are they merely an illustrated reflection of your varied interests, mocked up and put on display in a haphazard and relativist fashion? Or, was there a deeper, more ordered underlying connection implied? This may take us back to your comments on the current role of the curator, in that I imagine you hung this exhibition in a deliberate fashion, entirely on your own and without the input of a curator. There was a palpable aesthetic, a historical and polemical current running through these disparate images. And from what I can gather, this imagery was comprised of: old signage, political cartoons and propaganda flyers, Soviet Bloc pressings of rock and roll 45s, machinery diagrammatics, *New Yorker* cartoons, newspaper clippings, old adverts, graphics from Eastern Bloc toy packaging, pages and graphics from hippy-era small press magazines, wallpaper patterns, and various end title cards from cinema and retro book covers. That's quite a list! And this imagery isn't all from one specific chronological period, but spans from the Sun King to the slaying of Harvey Milk. Can you comment on your choice of imagery, and the connections they may share in that installation?

In addition, your installation subverts itself by creating tension between its organization as a cohesive whole and the scattershot vernaculars of the discrete objects it tenuously holds together. At the same time, it is interesting that you imagine the viewer's reading of the various images while in a state of distraction (riding the *Sun Machine*). Was this deliberate? Did you want to mimic a ride through the city by bicycle or car and have the viewer explore the kind of perception that results from being in motion? Did you want to show how images are in contest to grab the attention of a constantly moving and distracted reader?

Lately, you seem to be enacting a union of play, freedom, and critical thinking in your studio (I'm thinking of our group collage session the other night). This leads me to think about all of the paintings and drawings surrounding the *Sun Machine*, and how they were constructed with the aid of assistants. In light of what you mentioned about labour and cooperation, would you care to elaborate on this in regard to your current studio practice? Are the various aesthetics, materials, and quotations resulting from a group consensus in your studio?

RA: My choice of images is anything but haphazard or relativistic. Every image is very carefully chosen and considered. There are many images I collect that do not make it into paintings, drawings, or collages. You can see that on my blog, which really is a working scrapbook. There were several themes running through the exhibition. Oil was a major one, or the whole big machine of oil, cars, trains, planes, roads etc. Much of my work considers the material base of society. But, there are many images that referred to sexuality and religion too. The thinking is alternately materialist

and psychological; why do we do what we do and how do we do it. Behind the material aspect of modernity is the will that drives it. Some critiques concentrate on a notion of patriarchy, but I am more interested in what I call *heteroarchy* - I think it offers a more adequate explanation. However, I am an artist and not a social scientist or theorist and I only entertain ideas or theories as far as I am interested. This may confuse viewers who expect to be educated - art schools teach artists to work on projects that have a didactic purpose and form. I personally dislike this kind of art because it denies the artist the very freedom that such socially conscious art purports to promote. You read a lot of reviews by lefty critics taking the artist to task for not solving the world's problems. It's absurd. I guess I insist on the freedom to entertain the social or not as I please. It's not a choice between Matisse and Heartfield; you can have both and more at the same time - or not.

I didn't really think of the viewer riding through the images in the exhibition like a landscape, but that's not a bad idea. I guess it was meant as a kind of shit-storm of history blowing past the viewer. That is how we experience things. Lived life is never orderly and conclusive, and our memory is like a slide show where someone else has the clicker. It was possible to use assistants because I planned the paintings to be simple. Much of the work was filling in and didn't involve much interpretation. I always loved pre-silkscreen Warhol, early Lichtenstein, and early Polke. I tried to paint that way as a teen and I guess that I am picking it up again. When the image is so simple it is almost like sign painting, the reduced image becomes more like a word. I control everything though. I have had great assistants who might suggest the odd thing, but it isn't collaborative on the art level, just the craft level. I have always wanted to collaborate. I was a very idealistic artist when I was young, and it always saddened me that I couldn't find a way to collaborate. That is just the way it is, true collaborations are rare, and art is largely an individual affair.

AM: Can you discuss why you chose to create such graphic works in oils rather than producing screen prints? In regard to the figure of the rag-picker, are you that shadowy figure? I am thinking about the other gallery filled with your collage works, which in contrast to the other works seem to be more personal, and as far as I know they are comprised of materials and images collected and arranged solely by yourself. They possess more of a personal touch, and unlike the other more graphic two-dimensional works in the exhibition, they are all signed by your hand. Does this indicate a sort of distanced attitude towards the (unsigned) paintings and drawings in the exhibition?

RA: I use oils because they are beautiful! Acrylic paint just isn't as pretty, and I don't silkscreen because that only makes sense if you want multiple copies. The paintings are graphic, but they are also painterly. It doesn't have to be gobs of paint splashed on to be painterly. Yes, I am the bloody rag-picker! Are you happy you outed me Alex? It's interesting that with the rise of ecological truth, the rag-picker or also today's bottle collector, seem less like romantic figures and more like practical models for the future. I

have always seen myself as a *bricoleur*, even as a photographer. I've never staged photos that much. I've just found them. The collages are very personal works. I have collected books, magazines, and odd bits for a long time, and they get chopped up and reconstituted into the collages. The sculptures or assemblages are very close to the collages, but they are pushing out from the personal towards the public. I find collage the most therapeutic medium in that you don't know what you are doing, and this thing emerges that is very surprising and often revealing or informative. I feel as close to the paintings, they are not signed on the front, but they are signed on the back - who signs paintings on the front anymore? I guess I just see paintings as more formal than collage, at least the kind of paintings that I am making now. I imagine in the future my painting might move toward the informal. It's all the rage these days and I can see why, it looks very free.